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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the necessity for promoting a vigourous, prosperous, and free press addresses several areas of journalistic concern: the growing tendency toward disinterest in reading in a population that is nearly 100% literate; the decline of reading habits and motivation to read as reading skills improve; and the inability of newspaper circulation growth to keep pace with population growth. Several efforts to reverse these trends are described, including the organization of the Newspaper in Education program, in which local newspapers make copies of the newspaper available to teachers for classroom use, and the Newspaper Readership Project, a cooperative effort of 16 national and international newspaper associations to encourage newspapers in editing, circulation, advertising, promotion, personnel, research, training, and technology utilization. Efforts are suggested to attract nonreaders. (AEA)

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Joe D. Smith Jr.
"The New 'Illiteracy': A Threat to Newspapers?"
FIEJ Congress, June 8, 1979

I'm going to undertake a complex task this morning. I'm going to try to discuss thoughtfully with you one of the more amorphous and elusive things we newspaper people can think about. The question is: What will our readers be like in the future; who will read what; who will even read?

Will literacy increase -- or will illiteracy?

Recently, we have been hearing about new forms of illiteracy. While the developing world is working to increase true literacy among its populations; the developed nations, which now enjoy almost totally-literate populations, are finding there are new literacy challenges. Basically, there seem to be two such challenges: First, assuring that the formal educations we are providing are equipping our young people with the reading skills necessary for survival in today's world; and second, countering a tendency on the part of some of our population simply to refuse to read.

Literacy in a traditional sense is continuing to increase in the United States.

The 1970 census found that only about 1 percent of the U.S. population aged 14 or older could not read or write in any language. The figure was about 2 percent in 1960 and about 3 percent in 1950.

And more and more of our population is getting more and more formal education. In 1940 approximately 25 percent of our population had at least a high school education. That figure has been steadily increasing so that the percentage today is about 65.

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Yet, even as these traditional indicators of literacy are up, some social scientists warn that there are puddles of illiteracy diluting this vast sea of presumed literacy.

Researchers do not agree on the extent to which a segment of the public either can't read or won't read, but several of them are reporting some surprising statistics which lead some analysts to warn of a growing degree of what is called "functional illiteracy" or "political illiteracy." For example, a Gallup survey last year found only 3 percent of our nation's 17- and 18-year olds could correctly identify Alaska and Hawaii as the two newest states. In the same survey, only 4 percent could correctly name the three U.S. presidents who served prior to Gerald Ford. And only 44 percent knew that California is the most populous of the 50 states. Another researcher contends that some 20 percent of adult men and women in the United States cannot read well enough to understand newspaper help-wanted ads; nor can they, he says, write well enough to complete a job application form. And, the federally-sponsored National Assessment of Education Progress found that 13- and 17-year old students in 1974 used a simpler vocabulary and wrote in a more "primer-like" and incoherent fashion than their counterparts had in 1968.

In this country, and I imagine in many FIEJ countries, educational systems have begun reacting to surprising findings such as these. More and more of our universities, for example, are instituting or expanding basic language composition courses. And at least 17 U.S. states now require students to pass a "minimum competency test" as a requirement for high school graduation. These tests attempt to assure that high school graduates can demonstrate at least rudimentary practical skills in basic areas such as making the most economical purchase at a grocery store and making out a check at a bank.

A related and serious concern -- especially for us newspaper people -- is the reported decline in reading and in other communications skills evidenced since the mid-1960's in nationally standardized testing programs such as college entrance tests. Not only should we be concerned about the declines themselves as measured by such tests, but we also must ponder the effect lower reading skill has on interest in reading.

Robert Ellis, a reading expert with Time, Inc., describes the United States not as "illiterate" but as "post-literate."

He says:

> "That we are a society of readers is made clear by the fact that more than 90 percent of Americans read an English-language newspaper, magazine or book with some frequency. Only 5 percent can truly be described as nonreaders, and almost all of these are either visually handicapped or are readers of other languages. But, Americans are post-literate in another sense -- they no longer need to rely on the printed word to keep in touch with the wider world."

I would add that a number of Americans apparently are becoming "post-literate" in the sense also that they no longer want to keep in touch with the wider world -- through either the printed word or any other means.

Ethel Romm, another expert on reading, talks of a sort of class separation in America's reading society. She perceives "a shrinking reading class separating itself from a barely-reading mass."

Ms. Romm observes that when Eskimos no longer depend upon seals for food, clothing and fuel for their oil lamps they will loose the ability to hunt seals skillfully. She is concerned that our society might head toward a condition in which the only necessary reading would be the reading of road signs and product labels.

So literacy in the United States, and probably the world over, is still on the rise; but we, nevertheless, can be legitimately if not unduly concerned about tendencies toward a "post-literacy" condition in developed countries in which nearly everyone can read but a small but widening segment of the population chooses not to read any more than is absolutely necessary.

Reading skills even may be improving while reading habits somewhat decline. While nearly everyone reads a little, apparently very few read a lot. A 1970 study by Educational Testing Service disclosed that only 27 percent of readers 16 and over regularly read more than one newspaper. That survey also estimated that only 29 percent read at least one newspaper every day, at least one magazine every week and at least 11 books every year.

A later survey -- distributed last year as a part of the Newspaper Readership Project and called "How the Public Gets Its News" -- found that among people 18 or older 52 percent had read a newspaper on each of the previous five weekdays, 14 percent had read four out of five days, 10 percent three or four out of five days, eight percent one out of five days, and 16 percent hadn't read on any of the five days.

So the facts seem to be: some people don't read at all or only infrequently, but most of those who do read, read regularly.

Let's talk more about newspaper reading specifically.

My experience lies here in the United States, and I will address the situation of newspaper reading here. I suspect that something similar is happening in all the developed nations -- with the possible exception of Japan where, I understand, intense competition is causing some students who want to attain even moderate achievements to attend two schools instead of one. Many Japanese students, I'm told, go to a second school on their own time in order to improve their work in

their principal school. Apparently this occurs not just among students who need remedial instruction -- as usually is the case here in the U.S. -- rather it involves a large segment of students who perceive a necessity to finish high academically in order to find desirable employment and financial success. Perhaps not by coincidence, Japan prints some 550 newspaper copies daily for each 1,000 of its population -- compared with about 285 here in the United States.

Adult nonreaders of U.S. newspapers typically are considered to be young, un-married, less-educated and poor -- probably unemployed. But the U.S. has many "atypical" nonreaders -- nonreaders who don't fit the mold; people who you would expect by their educational level and other factors would be readers, but who aren't.

Paula Poindexter, in a survey reported in an ANPA News Research Report, found that 20 percent of nonreaders surveyed said they didn't have time to read a newspaper. This was the largest single factor cited for nonreading, and it was cited most often by nonreaders who don't fit the norm for nonreading. You know what that means as well as I do. It means those persons simply are not motivated enough to place newspaper reading higher on their agenda of things they want to do. Of course, there is a proliferation of reasons for that lack of motivation, but as newspaper people, one of our major projects should be motivation of readership by the nonreaders and infrequent readers of our "post-literate" societies.

Newspaper circulation in the U.S. has not kept pace with population growth. As I mentioned, we circulate today about 285 newspapers per thousand population. In 1970, that figure was about 305 newspapers per thousand.

These are circulation figures that concern us. These are the figures we've been working to turn around -- the trend we think we have stemmed because it was held steady since 1975. Actual circulation has grown steadily since 1975. Today it is just under 62 million; up from the 60.5 million in 1975 which was the low point since our largest circulation figure of more than 63 million in 1973. But right now our year-to-year circulation growth is barely reaching the pace of population growth.

Of course, we know that circulation numbers and readership statistics are not exactly the same thing, but both are useful yardsticks; and ANPA has been concentrating more of its efforts, especially since 1975, on building both readership and circulation.

One thing we know is that reading habits are established very early in life, largely based on the habits of parents and on a child's interest and success in school. Children who have been read to be their parents are more likely to be better readers and to be more interested in reading. Education, not surprisingly, may be the most important stimulus of reading; the higher the level of education completed the more likely an individual is to read, to read a variety of publications and to spend more time reading.

Researchers have been able to draw a corollary between the availability of the newspaper and both the development of the reading habit and political awareness. Adolescents who do not have a newspaper at home regularly and who have not used a newspaper in school are least informed about public figures and issues. Those who have used a newspaper in school or have it at home do better. And those who have the newspaper both at home and in school are best informed. And people who had newspapers in the homes and schools as children are more likely to be regular newspaper readers today.

The newspaper business organized the first national Newspaper in Education program in the mid-1950s. Newspaper in Education is a program in which local newspapers make copies of the newspaper available to teachers for classroom use, and help teachers find ways newspapers can be used as a successful teaching tool.

ANPA and its Foundation have run the national Newspaper in Education program since 1958, and there has been heavy emphasis on it in recent years. Last year, ANPA Foundation initiated an advisory service for newspapers which are starting or expanding Newspaper in Education programs. The former director of the Newspaper in Education program at The Detroit News was hired to provide this service. She visited 44 newspapers in the first 12 months, including 17 which had no program at the time of her visit. All but three of them now sponsor a program.

We have been expanding Newspaper in Education, and we have been working in other areas as well, to help build newspaper circulation and readership in the U.S.

One week ago, the Newspaper Readership Project entered its third year of operation. The Project initially was funded as a three-year program, but the boards of directors of both ANPA and the Newspaper Advertising Bureau in April approved in principle the continuation of the Project for three additional years. They will review specific proposals this fall.

I am co-chairman of the Newspaper Readership Council, which runs the Project.

One of the first things we did was to publish that extensive readership study on "How the Public Gets Its News" which I cited earlier. This comprehensive survey fills 1800 pages of computer printouts with some 430,000 separate percentage figures.

Although led by ANPA and the National Advertising Bureau, the Project is a cooperative effort of 16 national and international newspaper associations

including all aspects of newspapering -- editing, circulation, advertising, promotion, personnel, research, training, technology utilization, everything. It puts the "total newspaper concept" into practice at the level of the national newspaper associations.

Most important, it encourages every newspaper to establish its own Newspaper Readership Project by bringing together on a regular basis the heads of all the various departments of the newspaper and thus generate cooperative thinking on how that newspaper can build readership in its own market. Simultaneously, the associations cooperating in the Project are working together to provide newspapers with tools for building readership and circulation.

The results are encouraging. There are more than 330 local newspaper readership projects now in place. More important, we think circulation growth over the past year is due at least in part to the Newspaper Readership Project, of which the Newspaper in Education program plays a significant role.

Just a brief sampling of the tools the Newspaper Readership Project is providing to newspapers includes: an editor's exchange newsletter; promotional films and slides; idea booklets including one on newspaper design and another on circulation information systems; four advertising series; a training presentation on circulation in apartment houses, another on telephone solicitation, one on carrier recruitment and one on handling customer complaints; testing of a single-copy dispensing newspaper rack; and design and testing of new delivery vehicles.

We recognize that not every newspaper will be able to use each of these tools, but we hope the total output will provide something valuable for everyone.

It's appropriate for us to be thoughtfully concerned about readership trends in our societies. We need more information -- more research. Most of all, we need to cooperate with each other to help each newspaper survive and thrive.

And I would remind you that there is more than selfish business interests at stake. >

A free press is a great force in behalf of individual liberties within every free society. As President Carter told ANPA at its Convention in New York in April, "Liberty of expression is our most important civil right, and the freedom of the press is its most important bulwark."

A vigorous, prosperous and free press also is a vital link between all segments of society. It is a forum for ideas and a tool that can help the diverse segments of the world's population to better understand each other.

Some of our competitors realize how much society needs newspapers. Jim Duffy, president of American Broadcasting Corporation, has commented, "Despite its formidable growth, television cannot replace the newspaper. Anyone who thinks that is possible should have spent time in New York City during the newspaper strike. It seemed like you were in a lost city."

According to a Lou Harris survey taken last year, seven of 10 Americans consider their daily newspaper to be an excellent buy. Most important, that survey asked Americans whether they thought each industry held a concern for the community in which it does business. In that category, newspapers were perceived as the most concerned of all, by a large margin.

The newspaper provides in its columns the pulse-beat of news that every citizen needs to know if he or she is to play an active role in society. The newspaper chronicles our lives. A good newspaper always reflects its community. It's custom-edited; tailor-made for its community.

So, we must renew our efforts to attract nonreaders. We must keep trying to reach out to people who seem to want to take little or no part in society. We must seek to provide that which is of interest to all potential readers.

We must strive to make our newspapers' content meaningful and useful to every person. We must try harder to provide a newspaper which a reader or potential reader will take up and say, "This is my newspaper, and I am not too 'post-literate' not to need it!"

And, even though we have readership concerns, we also must conclude that when you count up all the communications voices, there has never before in history been more opportunity for people to be well-informed if they want to be. Never before have people in free nations had access to more information; or to a wider range of news and views.

So, as we face our challenges, including the readership challenge, we move into the 1980's with some solid support from the reading public -- a public to which we owe much and a public which we must strive first and foremost to continue to serve well.

As long as newspapers continue to serve readers and advertisers well, we can be assured there will be readers and advertisers to serve -- and free societies to serve them in. And that's a task worthy of our best efforts, because any society which has the misfortune really to become "post-literate," also will become "post-free."

Thank you.

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